

Testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Veterans Affairs

Good Morning Chairman Miller and esteemed committee members. My name is Dr. Casey O'Donnell. I am currently the Chief Operating Officer of Impact Services Corporation in Philadelphia. For the last 20 years Impact has been providing both housing and employment focused programs to homeless Veterans who suffer from both mental illness and alcohol and/or drug abuse. Impact's current continuum of housing include one-hundred fifty (150) beds of supportive transitional housing under the VA's Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program and supportive permanent housing under HUD's Supportive Housing Program (SHP). Impact's program was one of the first and is one of the few programs in the nation exclusively serving dually diagnosed formerly homeless Veterans. Since, 1994, Impact has also been providing employment services to over three hundred (300) homeless Veterans annually under the Department of Labor's Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program (HVRP). In addition to these programs, Impact has recently received a "Surge" Priority 1 grant under the VA's Supportive Services for Veterans Families (SSVF) Program and Impact has been a partner in collaboration with Project HOME and the Veterans Multi-services Center in Philadelphia in SSVF for the last three years. Over the last year, Impact has been extremely active in the VA's Boot Camp and Twenty-five Cities initiatives working to end Veteran homelessness in Philadelphia. Finally, Impact will break ground on twenty-six units of affordable, permanent housing for low-income Veterans and their families on Monday, December 15th. This new permanent housing for 26 Veteran families will be available in September 2015 and will contribute to ending Veteran homelessness. We are working in close collaboration with the VA National Center on Homelessness among Veterans to provide all of these services from a Trauma Informed Care model. Along with other community based housing providers I was invited to participate in the National Center's workgroup to implement Trauma Informed Care across the nation both within the VA and among community based partners. The National Center has been an invaluable collaborative partner in the provision of care to homeless veterans and the Center's work related to training and implementation will be critical to success. We believe that our testimony is derived from a place of competence and experience.

Men and women who have proudly served our country through military service should not be allowed to suffer in their addictions and mental illnesses on the streets of any city for one night longer. It is all of our job to find Veterans a safe places to live, recover from trauma and substance abuse, and improve the quality of their lives. In fact it is believed by those of us who are providers that "trauma informed care is necessary to eradicate homelessness among veterans".

Setting the deadline of December 31st, 2015 to end homelessness among Veterans has become a critically important milestone for our country. The deadline has provided us with a sense of urgency and dedication. The deadline is producing hard work, determination and teamwork where previously there was disconnection and a lack of accountability. Over the last eleven (11) months, in partnership with our many collaborative partners, we have placed 556 homeless Veterans in permanent housing in

Philadelphia. We have approximately 540 Veterans left to house before the deadline of December 31st, 2015.

The goal of ending Veteran homelessness in Philadelphia is within our sights.

We are ending Veteran homelessness in Philadelphia by developing a “Safety Net” system that “catches” Veterans before they become homeless, provides intervention when necessary to keep them housed, gets them housed again if they have slipped back into homelessness and most importantly, addresses their mental health challenges and/or addiction in an appropriate manner at whatever level needed as early as possible to prevent or address long-term homelessness. This safety net is critically important as we look at the Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan who are potentially vulnerable, may be suffering, and may be headed towards homelessness. Research provided by the National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans suggests that this rapid safety net approach is allowing approximately 80% of Vets to stay housed after ninety days of case management and temporary financial assistance through SSVF. Recent data provided by the City of Philadelphia’s Office of Supportive Housing also shows that the number of actual homeless Veterans on the streets and in many programs has decreased by 15% from 2013 to 2014. We expect that percentage to dramatically decrease in 2015 and to come to “functional zero” by January 2016.

This Safety Net system has only been possible within the context of real partnerships that are being forged between the community and the VA as part of the Boot Camp and Twenty-five Cities Initiatives in response to the December 31st, 2015 deadline. These partnerships have brought HUD, the VA, local municipalities, housing authorities and community organizations like Impact, to a common table where systems have been changed by bringing two continuums (the City and the VA) into alignment on outreach and assessment and eventually on placement and retention to ensure that Vets are being moved into housing.

Further, I would like to say that housing without jobs or increased benefits is only a short term strategy. Supportive housing integrated with programs to get Vets into jobs and/or access to benefits or increased benefits provides a long-term recipe for self-sufficiency. We would like to see the VA and the Department of Labor work closely to integrate community based job training and job development into the current housing activities funded for Veterans. A good place to start would be a pilot with community-based Veteran organizations like Impact to better integrate SSVF, GPD and HUD-VASH housing with the HVRP Program.

Finally, Impact currently operates four (4) Grant and Per Diem (GPD) programs that move homeless Veterans with a mental health diagnosis and drug and/or alcohol addiction through various stages of recovery to self-sufficiency according to their needs. Our program is currently full. It is full because there remains a critical need for GPD to provide stable housing and services for Veterans suffering from mental illness and substance abuse and/or dependency. Impact is extremely interested in working with



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Congress and the VA to test out several additional models of housing utilizing the VA's GPD program as the foundation of funding. Specifically, we would like to see a percentage GPD beds converted to provide supportive services and permanent (as opposed to only transitional) housing for formally homeless Veterans with mental health and substance abuse issues that require a higher degree of support than independent living can provide. We would also like to operate additional Safe Haven beds in Philadelphia that would have the ability to provide "wet" housing for chronic alcohol addicted veterans during a flexible period from ninety (90) days up to two (2) years. This will provide adequate time to work with the Veteran to get them stabilized and ready for recovery. Graduates of "wet" Safe Haven housing could move into Impact's current GPD transitional housing and eventually into independent living or supportive, permanent housing funded by HUD and/or the VA.

In conclusion, on behalf of my colleagues at Impact, myself, and the veterans that we serve I would like to thank the members of Congress for this opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

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